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Adapting Live-Action Role-Play in Japan: How “German” Roots Do Not Destine “Japanese” Routes

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Abstract :

Live-action role-play (larp), a mixture of improv-theatre and role-playing game where participants interact physically as characters in a shared story, draws thousands of participants in Europe but gained interest in Japan only since 2012 — with an exponentially increasing popularity. This young practice still faces various material constraints, one of which is the actual or perceived limited accessibility of space, another the availability of larp paraphernalia. Japan's larpers, however, have access to resources less known in Europe: 100-Yen-Shops. These shops offer a broad variety of products for just 100 yen, useful for larp as outlined by Japan's first “how-to-larp” publications. This paper discusses the development and current state of larp in Japan: How did “European-style” fantasy larp come to Japan? How was this practice adapted to local circumstances? How is it related to sibling practices, such as *cosplay* (masquerading) and pen & paper role-playing? Based on text-analysis, interviews, and participant observations, the paper analyses the ways of appropriation including the discursive and material constraints practitioners are entangled with. Conceptualizing larp as a network of heterogeneous human and non-human elements, the practice in Japan is hardly defined by a somewhat essential “Japaneseness” but produced through the tracing of these various elements. Fantasy larp as it is actualized in Japan combines “global” elements of larping with “local” materials so that the practice is (continuously) reassembled.

1 Introduction

The history of larp in Japan does not reach further back than the late 2000s. Once an acronym for live-action role-play but nowadays used as a term in itself, larp refers to various forms of combining shared storytelling and improv-theatre-like character-play with game elements. In Japan, this practice only started to awake broader interest in 2012 through the abridged and commented Japanese translation of *DragonSys*, a German-language rule-system for entertainment-oriented fantasy larp. Imagine *Lord of the Rings* for “real,” where participants enact their own stories and conflicts over a couple of hours or days.

As young as this form of larp is in Japan, it faces a number of material constraints, one of which is the actual or perceived limited accessibility of space — most larp groups meet in a community center and only rarely in the woods, the least on camping grounds or in a castle, which are common locations in Europe. Further, the availability of larp paraphernalia, foremost boffer weapons or pseudo-medieval clothes, may increase and diversify with the exponentially raising popularity of larp but the market remains expensive for the time being.

Japan's larpers do have access to an extraordinary source for equipment, though: 100-yen-shops (*hyaku-en-kinitsu-ten*, *hyakkin* for short).¹⁾ These shops offer a

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1) 百円均一店 or 百均 . Pronunciation: The “hy” in *hyaku* is pronounced like “h” in English *hue* or the “ch” in German *nicht* (IPA: ɸ, voiceless palatal fricative).



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broad variety of products, ranging from kitchen utensils and stationary, clothes and toiletries, to food and drinks – most goods sold for 100 yen (approx. 0.75 EUR) with a reasonable to good quality. Amongst these products larpers may also find a plethora of utensils befitting their trade: metal pendants, medieval looking jewelry, steampunky watches, apothecary's glass containers, masks, candles, incenses and more.

Taking its cue from Japan's first "how-to-larp" publications, this paper discusses the development and current state of larp in Japan, focusing on the first lasting larp group *Laymūn*: How did "European-style" fantasy larp come to Japan? How was this practice adapted to local circumstances? How is it related to sibling practices, such as *cosplay* (masquerading) and pen & paper or table-top role-playing? Based on readings of Japanese larp guide- and rulebooks, interviews with larp organizers, game designers, and cultural brokers, as well as participant observations at larp events, the paper traces how larp came to Japan via the translation of a German-language rulebook and analyzes ways of appropriation including the discursive and material constraints practitioners are entangled with.

However, it also contrasts these subjective or actually faced limitations with possibilities. The paper shows the differences small (and big) items bought for only 100 yen can make in the practice network called live-action role-play. By introducing a material-semiotic perspective to the study of larp, the paper seeks to question cultural ascriptions or nation-based categorizations of larp: Each instance of the practice exists only through its performance that always relies on local and global elements.

2 What Larp can be

Indistinguishable from a scene of a sword & sorcery movie, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, you see a group of orcs charging into a battalion of humans and elves but instead of hearing metal clashing, you perceive the participants counting down life points after being hit with authentic-looking but soft boffer weapons. Half a kilometer away, in a city of tents, a

lawyer-by-day in the guise of a blacksmith haggles with her customer over the price in gold for a thieves' toolset, which actually had been paid for via PayPal already the week before. This can be larp. For example, at the annual mass events, such as *DrachenFest* (Wyvern, since 2001) or *Conquest of Mythodea* (Live-Adventure, since 2004) in Germany, that last for five days and draw over seven thousand adult participants.

Inspired by the popular TV-show *Downton Abbey* (ITV 2010-15), people are cast in roles either upstairs, thus nobles and upperclass citizens, or downstairs, as servants, to experience first-hand the conflicts and difficulties but also hierarchy-overcoming bonds of Edwardian class-society (*Fairweather Manor*, Dziobak Studios, since 2015). This can be larp, too. Falling in the category of "blockbuster larp," such weekend-long events invite a hundred or more participants to come together in a rented castle, on a sailing ship crossing the Baltic Sea in a re-imagining of Dracula's voyage (*Demeter*, Dziobak Studios, since 2014), or on a retired battle cruiser re-made into a shapcship (*Monitor Celestra*, Alternativ HB, 2013) to collaboratively experience a shared story.

After a long preparatory workshop: Players become occupiers, soldiers of a fictional Uralian state now controlling the Finnish territories; or they take on the guise of Finnish university students and staff organizing a controversial conference, which calls the aforementioned soldiers to campus. They play life under occupation in the Finnish-Palestinian co-production *Halat Hisar* (Kangas, AbdulKarim & Pettersson, 2013 & 2016), which sought to immerse the participants in this difficult situation that is so very real for many, including some of the organizers. Financially supported by the Finnish government and today also exhibited in the Museum of Games in Tampere, this designed experience made people think. This too can be larp and is part of the framework of "Nordic Larp," which originates in discussions at the Scandinavian larp conference Knudepunkt (Stenros 2014).

Kids and young adults running through the woods and fighting hordes of undead. Educational or edu-larp can look very much like fantasy larp for adults. While having fun at a summer camp for 13- to 18-year-olds,

where members of the organizing team grew from players into co-designers themselves, the participants do not only learn how to wield a sword or convincingly portray spellcasting, they also learn about teamwork, how to behave in forests, or that one should not judge a grotesque orc by his looks. Often receiving public funds for social youth work, such events speak to parents who delight if their children come home excited and dirty instead of sitting bent over their smartphones. Other educational larps exactly explore the familiarity of young people with such devices.

2.1 Understanding Larp

Larp is usually play, a *paratelic* activity, that is, the goal of this activity is doing it (Apter 1991, 15).²⁾ Most enter a playful mindset when larping but, as Jones, Koulu, Torner (2016) and others have pointed out, larp may also include work, be it the labor of the organizers making the larp possible in the first place, or labor performed by characters within the diegetic space of the game, for example as servants cleaning shoes downstairs.

The late 1990s and early 2000s, were concerned with defining larp (reprints of so-called manifestos can be found in Fatland and Wingård 2014; Pohjola 2014): What are necessary features for an activity/an event to be named larp? What is role-playing, or more precisely, what is good role-playing or good larping? How is it different from theatre (e.g., no audience), from psychodrama, from table-top gaming, so-called TRPGs?³⁾

- 2) Apter distinguishes between *telic* endeavors with an outside goal or exterior reward (e.g., work to gain money) and *paratelic* activities which are ends in themselves (1991).
- 3) In English, TRPG usually stands for table-top role-playing game. In Japanese, this acronym refers to table-Talk RPG instead. This term was coined by the game designer Kondō Kōshi in the 1980s to differentiate this form of playing from computer and console games, which had entered the Japanese market at the same time but gained traction and popularity much quicker so that the term “RPG” became mostly associated with digital games.

The global mainstream of larp remains fantasy or sword & sorcery, followed by science-fiction and (personal) horror (based on pen & paper games, such as, *Vampire*, Rein-Hagen 1991; Rein-Hagen, Lemke, and Tinney 1993; or *Call of Cthulhu*, Petersen and Willis 1981). The above examples only offer a few glimpses into the possibilities of larp. Once an acronym, L A R P standing for life-action role-play, the term has become a word in itself in many languages, used as a noun or a verb (cf. Fatland 2005; Holter, Fatland, and Tømte 2009), emancipating the activity from any of the meanings of the original compounds (especially from the “action” part linked to combat). Larp today covers all possible genres, may have an artistic or political agenda (thus, becoming *telic*), take several days or a few minutes. Keeping this diversity in mind, especially designers and larpwrights today have an inclusive or modular approach, which is fore and foremost expressed in the concept of the “Mixing Desk of Larp” (cf. Andresen and Nielsen 2013). This mixing desk visualizes design choices and helps translate ideas into an experience for others. Thus, the faders include items such as rules (larps including fighting or magic need many, “Nordic larps” only a few for social interaction), transparency (how much do players know before the event), competition or collaboration, and so forth.

Similar to this practical approach and heavily borrowing from authors such as Wittgenstein (cf. “family resemblance,” Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, 36e) or the field of material semiotics (Law and Mol 2002; Law 2004; Law 2007), I understand “larp” as a connector word, not as something to be defined, but the hyper-textual link between various instances of practice. “Larp” brings these instances into relation, lets people communicate about their various practices.

2.2 Larp as a Practice-Network

Accordingly, I refer to role-playing games not as a hobby, community, or scene but seek to reflect on their semiotic and material diversity through the concept of *assemblage of practices* (Kamm 2016; Kamm forth). *Assemblage* in this instance refers to a complex gestalt of partially connected practices, so that each and every

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session of a pen & paper role-playing game as well as each and every larp become a specific configuration within this *assemblage* or network. Practices drawn as networks have gained a certain durability that makes them recognizable for others with the consequence that they can be spoken about and be treated as a resource when doing the practice. This practice-as-network (see Fig. 1) consists of interdependent material and non-material elements (cf. Schatzki 1996; Reckwitz 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) that encompass bodies (and costumes), body parts, bodily movements (such as writing and throwing dices in TPRGs; body language),⁴ materials or things, but also practical knowledge or know-how/competences in rhetoric, storytelling, strategy and tactics, an understanding of game rules, knowledge of directly or indirectly cited genres and motifs (fantasy, horror, etc.), and concepts/theoretical knowledge of the practice, such as an idea of the physical and psychological gratifications to be received, and so on. Not only humans but also non-humans, take on the role of actors, meaning that their presence or absence has a decisive effect upon the network (Latour 2005; Schlickmann 2015).

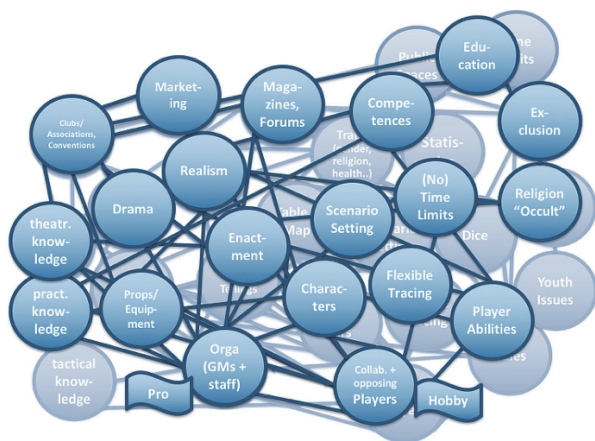


Fig. 1: Larp as a Practice-Network.

Practices-as-network are performative, meaning that they exist through “doing,” through recreating, tracing the network. They are also recursive, that is, each performance (execution) rearranges the network slightly (such as rule details, necessary competences,

types of body movements and so on).⁵ Some node points (“elements”), however, obtain a certain degree of durability through this recursiveness, so that for example “character construct” became a fixed element of most arrangements of role-playing games (even if internal compositions of this construct may differ). Other nodes may lose their centrality, so that also larps *without* game masters (referees) are practiced.

Conceptualizing larp as a network of heterogeneous human and non-human elements, the practice in Japan is hardly defined by a somewhat special “Japaneseness,” by which I mean essentialist ascriptions of *uniqueness*. Post-World-War-II *nihonjinron* thought, a large body of ethnocentric nationalism in intellectual and popular literature, “discourses on the Japanese,” defines the Japanese a-historically as a homogeneous, isolated society sui generis and their practices and thinking as radically different from any other people (Sugimoto 1999; Befu 2001). Not few research on so-called Japanese popular culture, such as anime, manga, and games, by scholars from outside Japan tends take these ideas at face value, feeding into nationalistic narratives (Ōtsuka 2015) and disregarding how cultural practices are the result of ongoing processes of exchange (Juneja and Kravagna 2013). Following a transcultural perspective and a material-semiotic approach instead, this paper shows how roots do not destine routes, and that larp events in Japan are produced through the *particular* tracing of connections between various network elements like any other actualization of the practice. Fantasy larp in Japan combines the *global* elements of larping with *local* materials so that the practice is (continuously) reassembled.

3 Larp in Japan

I myself, however, am guilty of producing a homogeneous Japan by asking, “why does Japan not larp?” (Kamm 2011) — as if a nation, the abstract entity, could larp. Despite the image of Japan as the originator of *cosplay*, I learned from pen & paper players and game designers that dressing-up and thus

4) Concerning body language, see Säilä (2004).

5) See Butler (1990); Andresen and Nielsen (2013).

larping was not associated with role-playing games in Japan.⁶⁾ Many know the arrangement *raibu* RPG (literally, “live RPG”) in Japan, which bears some resemblance to *True Dungeon* in the US.⁷⁾ Despite the “live” descriptor, this arrangement of gaming is more at home in the format of table-top games than larp. *Raibu* RPGs exist as treasure-hunt-like sessions at events and conventions, such as the Japan Game Convention (JGC) or at its successor since 2017, the TRPG Festival. Forty or more players are divided into groups, each with their own game master (GM). The setting is usually a huge dungeon adventure and in 90-minute sessions the groups explore different parts of this dungeon in a “classical” pen & paper manner. After each session, the groups meet to share intelligence and exchange found items. In the end, all groups come together in one single room to jointly fight a dragon or similar powerful monster. The focus is less on role-playing and character development than on riddles, puzzles, and combat tactics.

If it comes to costuming, *cosplaying* is another larp-like practice, which focuses on dressing-up as a character and is currently very much associated with Japan. *Kosupure* is a made-up loan word combining “costume” and “play” (Aida 2004, 112). It refers to the masquerading as a character from popular media, such as anime, computer games, or Hollywood movies. Cosplay has its roots at the Japan Science Fiction Convention of the 1970s, where a costume show was established in the spirit of similar practices of US American WorldCon’s “Masquerade” (Takeda 2002,

102). In 1977/1978 people started to base their costumes on anime characters as well and the practice spread to the Comic Market or Comiket (Japan’s largest, bi-annual amateur manga and game convention).⁸⁾

The game designer Okada Atsuhiko, who has cosplay experience, sees the main difference between role-playing, including larp, and cosplay in the approach to the characters “played” (personal interview, 2010): A role-player or larper wants to act like another character or at least wants to play the character in a story or game. The cosplayer wants to look like a chosen, usually pre-existing character instead. Hinasaki Yū, the founder of the larp group *Laymūn* (see below), sees similar differences and adds that cosplay mainly focuses on taking pictures (e-mail conversation, 2014).

Despite the recognition of airsoft (tactical outdoor combat simulations) in Japan, the number of individuals engaging also in role-playing games is extremely limited, similar to cosplay. From the outside, these practices may appear very similar (e.g., involving costuming, character play, combat, and/or outdoor events) but based on my fieldwork and interviews with informants, the practitioner populations do rarely overlap. Large outdoor fantasy larps are also unheard of, even though Japanese larpers have explored this idea (Hinasaki 2015, 34) and organized a first (and so far, last) outdoor event in November 2015.⁹⁾

Larping, fore and foremost in its fantasy variant as

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- 6) Between 2010 and 2012 I conducted over 25 formal episodic interviews with role-players and game designers in Japan, followed by participant observations and conversations at game conventions and trade shows in Japan between 2010 and 2018.
- 7) *True Dungeon* developed from an annual *Dungeons & Dragons* event by Jeff Martin, who used real props in his games, to an event at GenCon LLC in 2003, where players enter rooms, have to solve riddles and fight off monsters. While the original “JeffCONs” used the rules from *D&D*, the *True Dungeon* eschews dices in favour of a shuffleboard on which players have to slide counters in order to score hits.

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- 8) For an overview of the history and infrastructure behind Japan’s *dōjin* (amateur or fan) market, see Tamagawa 2012, despite the too simple equation of *otaku* with “fan”). Role-playing games or RPG supplements made by independent and amateur designers belong also to the genres sold at this convention and others like it.
- 9) Important to note, also in late 2015 a larp group — mostly consisting of foreigners and playing in English — formed in Aichi prefecture (Underworld LARP Japan-Guildhouse: Havenhollow; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1520452058215307>, accessed 2018/11/03). They hold monthly, weekend-long events deep in the woods near Toyota-City on land owned by the main organizer, Steven Smith. He also manages a shop for larp gear. In 2018, they had a first joint event together with a larp group consisting of Japanese nationals.

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it is popular in Europe, came to Japan only recently. Before 2012 there had been two smaller horror-larps and a crime scene urban larp organized by American video game developer and English teacher Nicholas Wagon but no events hosted by Japanese role-players (cf. Kamm 2011). In light of these findings, I sought an answer to the question why larping was barely present in Japan and could relate this absence to space — space in the physical sense and also in regard to what my informants found to be sanctioned behavior in public. Both forms of “space” were apparently missing from the experiences and expectations of role-players living in Japan. The “cultural broker” Nico Stahlberg,¹⁰⁾ however, proved my write-up of these findings wrong in the sense that they have become outdated: His abridged translation of the German rule-system *DragonSys* kickstarted the development of larp groups in Japan.

3.1 Translating & Transforming *DragonSys*

Stahlberg used to call himself an “entrepreneurial student” and had studied Asian-African Regional Studies, focus Japan, at Humboldt University (personal interview, 2013; source of all following accounts). From 2011 to 2012 he took part in an exchange program with Tōkai University, Tokyo, to improve his language skills and also to promote larp as it turned out. At Tōkai he soon joined the university’s pen & paper role-playing club but made the experience that his vocabulary was not sufficient enough to fully take part in what happened at the game table.

He had informed himself about role-playing in Japan before he went to Tokyo and so had also stumbled on the above article on “Why Japan does not larp,” which was available via the Knudepunkt 2011 website. He wondered if it was true that there was no larping in Japan, and if so, what he could do about it. Stahlberg had come to larp via re-enactment but found

the latter too much concerned with “authenticity.” Searching for information about larp in Japan on the web he came across the website-cum-forum of JIGG, “Japan’s International Gamers Guild,” a group founded by two American English teachers in 1992 in order to continue their analog gaming hobbies while in Japan and connect with others who shared their interests. Today, JIGG uses the scheduling site “Meetup” to organize their events.¹¹⁾ On the group’s forum in 2011, however, Stahlberg found a call for a “larp consultant,” for someone who could guide people into larping, issued by Jay Noyes, the founder of “Castle Tintagel” in Tokyo, where he teaches medieval martial arts. Noyes, a long-standing member of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), saw potential in adding larp to his school’s portfolio and so issued the call because he believed to lack the necessary experience himself. When Stahlberg arrived in Japan he soon met with Noyes and spoke with him about what he had in mind concerning larp at “Castle Tintagel:” “There was no foundation on which to build larping,” Stahlberg remembers, “so Tintagel would become this foundation, what would give larping structure.” From reading “Why Japan does not larp,” Stahlberg judged that one could not assemble larp the same way it was done in Germany, that one had to adapt, adjust, and change many, or at least some of the elements of larping he had become familiar with. He knew also US American larp rule systems but said that in essence he could only draw on his experiences in Germany.

So, his first step was to establish contact with Japanese role-players and those studying at Noyes’s school. Beginning at the foundation, he wanted to know “what makes a rule system.” The responses he received boiled down to “strict instructions and procedures” — so something like DKWDK (“you, the character, can do what you, the player, can do”), a larp “system” popular in Germany that offers almost no rules, was out of the question. The answers Stahlberg received are more or less congruent to the feedback after the mini urban larp in Akihabara Nicholas Wagon organized in 2010:

10) With “cultural broker” I refer to actors who purposefully negotiate between cultural spheres and “work” as translators, not just of language but also practices (see, Kamm 2017). Cultural brokers are actors in the sense that they also transform what they transfer.

11) Cf. www.meetup.com/JIGG-Tokyo, www.meetup.com/JIGGKansai (both accessed 2018/11/03).

Players preferred clear rules telling them what they can do and how — at least until they had collected enough experience to move on to freer, less rules-structured game play. This does not amount to an unusual pattern of “evolution,” if we look at many different larp rules and their editions, often moving from complex and restricted to freer play over the years (e.g., *DragonSys*). Setting-wise most of those Stahlberg spoke to were interested in fantasy or sword & sorcery, what they knew from literature and pen & paper gaming. With Tintagel at the centre of Stahlberg’s network building attempts he thus opted also for a (low) fantasy, pseudo-medieval setting.

Based on these premises and the German larp rules he was most familiar with — *DragonSys* second edition (Schlump and Hölzel 2004) — together with one of Tintagel’s employees, Sugiura Nobutaka, Stahlberg began to develop a rule system for the “Tintagel larps.” Even though *DragonSys* delivered a strict rules system for creating characters and using skills, including magic, it was designed for larps that usually last at least a weekend if not longer. From the feedback he had received, time constraints appeared much tighter in Japan. During our conversation, Stahlberg admitted that he was not able to rewrite the rules completely, which especially would later interfere with learning skills or creating potions, for example. While the latter should take hours during a multi-day larp, it interfered with only a few hours of gameplay if the player was absent to make his or her potion somewhere else. During the first larps Tintagel organized, they would repeatedly change the duration of such endeavors in order to adjust for the limited time available for a larp.

In 2012 Stahlberg and Sugiura had finally completed their work to such a degree that they could make it available on Tintagel’s homepage and start workshops for those interested in larping. The rulebook was named *Patoria Sōrisu* (Patria Solis, Stahlberg and Sugiura 2012) and published as a PDF for free. Stahlberg had received a license from the original designers but only for non-commercial purposes and only in Japan.

3.2 Larp Awareness and Foundations

Stahlberg, Sugiura and Noyes began to advertise larp and invited people to workshops, employing the “usual” channels, such as Tintagel’s website, flyers in game stores, and the social networking site mixi.jp, a then popular SNS, now mostly replaced by Twitter. Their first workshops enrolled about twenty participants, of which most were women. “Some of the guys had only come because their girlfriends wanted to,” said Stahlberg. Even though most of those who came to these workshops — during which Stahlberg and colleagues explained and showed the basics of their rules for and ideas behind larp — knew pen & paper role-playing, larp interested a different clientele than the average TRPG, which supposedly is a “male” hobby (but see, Kamm 2016). Stahlberg observed some reluctance to join because apparently many attributed role-playing and so larp with *otaku*-ish (“geeky”) stereotypes of strangeness (cf. Galbraith, Kam, and Kamm 2015). However, many seemed surprised that mostly “normal” people and women were present. Half of the workshop participants had only come to receive some information about larp as only ten registered for the first play event. Stahlberg describes this first larp as akin to a murder mystery cum tavern-style event, in which the players had to find out who had used magical poison against the Baron of Castle Ebendar, a central location in their larp world Karminya — with the in-game castle taking-up the same physical space as “Castle Tintagel,” that is one large training hall for swordsmanship. The players conducted a magical ritual to find answers to the riddle of the attack against the Baron, “... which was cool for beginners. They got this idea from an example in the rules,” muses Stahlberg. On the other hand, if something was not stated in the rules in *Patoria Sōrisu*, players would not do it but had to be encouraged once or twice to try.

Including one brief outdoor session, Tintagel organized six Karminya larps until early 2013, the first events game mastered by Stahlberg. They continued to offer (paid) workshops which drew a steady flow of interested players and in which those who had participated in larps already would act as “role models.” Dressed-up in character they would act out what the

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organizers explained. However, since late 2013 the Karminya campaign came to a halt and has not resumed since then. After Stahlberg returned to Germany and due to financial considerations, Tintagel had to focus on its core business, Noyes explained to me in 2018.

Offering *Patoria Sōrisu* for free and teaching larp through the workshops circumvent Tintagel as the only centre of calculation, though. One very active participant, Hinasaki Yū (a pen-name) took what she learned and founded a larp circle in Iruma City, Saitama prefecture, named *SW 1.0 Fārando LARP Circle Laymūn*, which uses the classic *Sword World RPG* (= SW 1.0) for its setting. *Sword World* (Mizuno and GroupSNE 1989) was the “gold standard” fantasy pen & paper RPG in the 1990s and its world is globally known through the manga and anime franchise *Record of Lodoss War* (Yasuda and GroupSNE 1986; Nagaoka and Watanabe 1990).

As of this writing, Hinasaki’s circle organizes a monthly game line at the Iruma Community Center. On their homepage, they host trailers for their activities, which consist mostly of one-room mystery adventures and involve “European-style” boffer weapon fighting.¹²⁾ Since 2015, they organize horror larps based on their own larp system, “Memento Mori” (Hoshikuzu and CLOSS 2015). In 2017, they followed with the publication of “Epic of Pleiades,” a universal fantasy larp rulebook, roughly based on *Patoria Sōris* but updated and adjusted to fit their own needs and building on their organizing experience (Hoshikuzu and CLOSS 2017; cf. also Fig.3). As a supplement, they developed a larp set-up based on Japanese folklore (Hoshikuzu and CLOSS 2018), where players become samurai and *onmyōji*, practitioners of divination and occultist science at the imperial court. Building on the one-room setup at Tintagel and following the limitations of using a community center (e.g., being bound to its opening hours), Laymūn have developed a sophisticated approach to manage space and time. During outdoor larps, players may roam the at times

several hectares large location to encounter enemies or riddles over several days. Laymūn larps on the other hand last mostly one afternoon and thus rely on structured scenes guiding the players through the story. The game masters announce and explain a scene before the players interact with each other and non-player characters (predefined roles with specific tasks). Players move between scenes and locations by crossing the threshold of a portable wall dividing the room. For example, after a scene in the forest where the players learn something about the treasure they are seeking, the organizers prepare the next scene in the other half of the room (see Fig. 2). Though highly structured, Laymūn larps still allow for player agency. They could decide to follow the newly discovered lead immediately and move towards their enemy’s castle, for example, or they decide to regroup and refresh in the tavern before that, triggering a scene in the latter location.

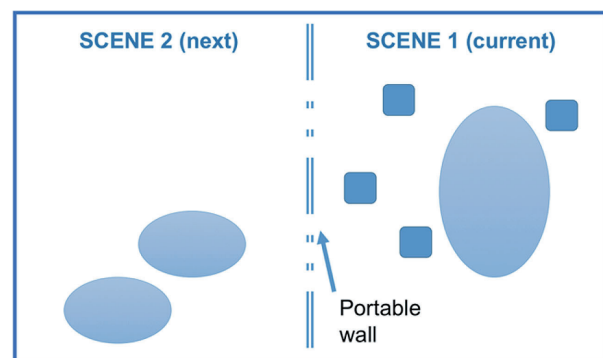


Fig. 2: Room Use at Laymūn Larps.

In 2013, the group published an introductory guide to larping, in which they detail how to make appropriate clothing or where to buy necessary equipment, such as boffer weapons, among other things (Hinasaki 2013), followed by further guidebooks (Kuroki 2014b; Kuroki 2014a) and a manual for larp group organization (Hinasaki 2015) — books to which we will return below (see Fig. 3). The size of the group had reached about thirty in 2015 but did not increase much further (growth in the form of new groups would come later). Hinasaki complained at the time in an e-mail exchange that they advertised their events on mixi.jp in respective groups but received no reply from

12) *Laymūn* homepage: <http://laymun.minim.ne.jp> (accessed 2018/11/03).

TRPG players. Hinasaki also helped translate the “Larp Census 2014” questionnaire of Aaron Vanek and Ryan Paddy into Japanese.¹³⁾ The number of respondents who chose “Japan” as their country of residence more or less equaled the number of Laymūn circle members. Three years earlier, this number would have been close to zero. Stahlberg is known to most of these larpers and was one of the major actors translating and rearranging larp for players living in Japan.



Fig. 3: Larp Guidebooks (back) and Rulebooks (front).

Hinasaki Yū took over in this regard and her guidebooks count among the most noteworthy “non-human” actors in the field. These books point the reader to steps for organizing larps, managing a larp group, and in various forms describe how and where to obtain the right tools for this trade. Among these sources for equipment, 100-yen- shops take a prominent place.

3.3 100-Yen-Shops

In the 1990s, 100-yen-shops counted among the symbols for the (ongoing) recession that resulted from the bursting of Japan’s asset price bubble of the previous decade (“bubble economy”). Only ten years later, however, they had become an accepted part of everyday life (Kanemitsu 2001). Framed as spaces where not things (read, goods) but a kind of atmosphere or pleasure can be bought with just one coin, 100-yen-shops are said to have taken up their place as the

“fourth major trade business” in people’s minds and consumption behavior, coming after department stores, super markets, and convenience stores (Ma 2013, 36).

Before 100-yen-shops ascended to their current level of ubiquitousness and acceptance (Toda and Mitani 2015, 53), supermarkets and department stores had offered 100-yen-corners or special sales where customers could buy goods for relatively cheap prices in the 1960s. The first store that was actually called a “100-yen shop” opened in March 1985 in Kasugai-City, Aichi prefecture. Yano Hirotake, the founder of Daisō Inc. (Hiroshima), opened his first store in 1991 and sought to create a new shopping experience of low prices and high product quality — at times beyond the break-even point. His alleged goal was to offer as many high-quality products as possible, so that consumers could buy without worrying about the costs and could spent time searching for “treasures” (*takara sagashi*, Ma 2013, 37). As we will see, this image of a “treasure hunt” also accurately describes the modus operandi of larpers looking for equipment. Yano’s business strategy was so successful that Daisō is not only the number one 100-yen-shop chain in Japan today but its annual turnover of 3.7 hundred-billion yen (ca. 2.7 billion EUR) is twice as much as that of its three major competitors (Seria, CanDo, Watts) combined.

Daisō has further expanded its business to East and South East Asia, Australia, North and South America, and the Middle East (only Europe seems left out). After an era of 0,1% growth that led to doubts in the business model (Tanaka 2011), the four major Japanese players seem to have withered the storm and are back on their feet.

Seeking to explain the success of 100-yen-shops in Japan (and why they would not work in Europe), economists like to point to Japan’s “*waribashi bunka*,” its throwaway culture.¹⁴⁾ While Europeans would use things for decades, Japanese preferred new, clean things and were comfortable with throwing things out after

13) See <http://www.larpcensus.org> (accessed 2018/11/03).

14) *Waribashi* refers to disposable wooden chopsticks, those a customer receives in a (not so expensive) restaurant or food stall or people buy for BBQ parties not unlike Europeans employ plastic cutlery.

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use, says television economist Morinaga Takuro (Toda and Mitani 2015, 56). If he only observed how Europeans flock to 100-yen-shops while in Japan — to buy anything one needs to set up an apartment, from dishes, slippers, toilet cleaners, to cooking herbs, or anything else, even jewelry and make-up (100-yen-shops came a long way from selling only stationary and key holders) — he would know that national culture does not explain much in this instance. Important to note for the context of this paper is how common place 100-yen-shops have become with over 5.000 locations in Japan and that many of their products are of a much higher quality (and longevity) than one might expect for a mere 100 yen.¹⁵⁾

Thus, when larp became wider known (and practiced!) in Japan, the possibilities of 100-yen-shops for equipping oneself remained not unnoticed for long.

3.4 Larp Guidebooks and just 100 Yen

Hinasaki's guidebooks fulfill a similar function as do the "LarpWiki" and larper.ning in the German-speaking countries or craft and sewing instructions in larp-oriented Facebook groups: They offer beginners an introduction to larp and show ways on how you can participate even without a large budget and full-plate armor. In *LARP no susume* ("LARP for you," Hinasaki 2013) Hinasaki describes the difficulties and above all the cost of purchasing larp equipment in speciality shops — in 2013, respective online shops where all selling from abroad. Now in 2018, several local resellers offer such equipment, their prices remain high, however, due to the monopoly of one equipment producer. Costumes produced by the cosplay industry

are often equally expensive and lack the sturdiness necessary for running and fighting because they were designed for taking photos (see above). Regarding a cost-effective and reasonable acquisition, she recommends the following "Big 3" to larpers in Japan: 100-yen-shops, second-hand clothing, and Uniqlo (a distributor of cheap leisurewear; *ibid*, 8). The *hyakkin* rank first and represent a core element of the three groups into which she divides larpers (in Japan):

- *Otegaru taipu*: The "simple type" who goes to 100-yen-shops and second-hand shops for treasure hunting
- *Shokunin taipu*: The "artisan-type" who manufactures and crafts herself
- *Honkakuha taipu*: The "orthodox type" who orders in speciality stores¹⁶⁾

Like so much concerning larp, these types should not be understood as exclusive classifications, but rather as tendencies.¹⁷⁾ The example outfits that she presents after introducing this typification, are also not pure specimens. Fig. 4 shows a "simple fighter" and one may also discern without knowledge of Japanese, that he indeed acquired his gloves, belt and bag via 100-yen-shops. Additionally, his boots come from Uniqlo and the shirt from a second-hand store. Despite looking out for bargains, he does not abstain from a "real" larp sword.

Also Kuroki Sōshi's instructions for making full-plate armor are based on the possibilities offered by *hyakkin*, so that the most expensive "ingredients" are a *cosplay* helmet (3000 ¥) and the silver coating (1800 ¥), with which the other parts, such as fabric tape and toilet slippers can appear metallic (Kuroki 2014a, 25).

15) Since the reform of Japan's value-added tax law in 2014, the actual price at the register is 108 yen per item. Some items also cost more, e.g. 300 or 500 yen (before tax). The production price of items begins as low as 21 yen (thanks to mass production in China) but may go above the actual sales price. Apparently, the production cost of expensive items and the cheaper ones even each other out at the point of sale (Morinaga in Toda and Mitani 2015). For more sophisticated analyses of 100-yen-shops and their business models, see Tanaka (2011); Nishiguchi (2012).

16) The three types in Japanese characters: お手軽タイプ、職人タイプ、本格派タイプ (Hinasaki 2013, 9).

17) Another classic example is the division into Dramatist, Gamist and Immersionist, when it comes to game design and playing styles (see "The Three Way Model," Bøckman 2003).



Fig. 4: “Definitely a bargain! The Simple Type, No. 2.” (from Hinasaki 2013, 11).

Now, rummaging through granny’s clothes chest as well as crafting, sewing, hammering and maybe even welding are not really unknown elements of larps. However, 100-yen-shops offer not only craft materials, but invariably a large number of “ready-made” products, which can be directly used without major adjustments for (fantasy) larps. Since images can often say more than a thousand words, I would like to refer to Fig. 5, showing some shelves in 100-yen-shops. Especially alchemists and magicians are likely to discover tools among the selection of containers, jars and bottles, but one also has no problems with hosting the next seafaring con or playing an eccentric time traveller whose extremities are wrapped with wristwatches.

Especially, because larps in Japan almost exclusively take place in enclosed spaces such as those of the Iruma community centre, the many small objects from 100-yen-shops are also employed to create the atmosphere for play sessions and to bring the fantastic setting of the games closer to the *mise-en-scène*. Thus, all sorts of props, such as keys, tarot cards and magic

components, but also usually the lighting (such as electronic tea lights) hail from *hyakkin*. Until now, Tolkien- and Lovecraft-inspired larps count among the most popular genres as almost everywhere in the world. However, as mentioned above, players currently explore the possibilities of an Edo-larp including mythical creatures from folklore, such as *oni* (Hoshikuzu and CLOSS 2018). Edo is the old name of Tokyo, which is also used to name the period of 1603-1868, which was marked by the rule of the warrior nobility (*samurai*) and features repeatedly in many so-called *jidaigeki* (fictional period-pieces) on Japanese television as the golden age of honor and sake drinking (thus, of “masculinity”). Here too many utensils can be found in 100-yen-shops (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 5: 100-yen-shop shelves (Photos by B.-O. Kamm 2015, 2018).



Fig. 6: Sake utensils in a 100-yen-shop (Photo by B.-O. Kamm 2018).

4 “Japanese” Larp/Larp in “Japanese”

Via the close connection to the world of *Sword*

World RPG, which evolved out of *Dungeons & Dragons* game sessions (the first fantasy RPG advertised as such, Gygax and Arneson 1974), and the use of a rule system that also comes from the fantasy genre (*Patoria Sōrisu*, *DragonSys*), most larpers from Europe are likely to gain access to the Laymūn games quickly — if they spoke Japanese, that is. Notwithstanding the props and armor, language remains a if not *the* decisive element of the practice larp.¹⁸⁾ Larps in Japanese experience an exponential growth rate with new groups founded almost every month. As of this writing, ten groups are active all around the country (cf., CLOSS 2018). In 2016, some Laymūn members founded a national larp association named CLOSS, which does not organize larps itself but hosts workshops or offers consultation services for new groups.¹⁹⁾ Thus, many organizers learned how to larp from CLOSS/Laymūn, following similar patterns of structuring events. Some larpers from Japan began traveling to Europe to participate in events and study how outdoor larps are conducted there. Moreover, new groups develop their own forms, such as the combat-centric *Yuru LARP*, where participants do not need to dress-up or at least not genre-specific, so that school girls may fight full-plated knights. This paper has focused on Laymūn-style and Laymūn-inspired larp as it is practiced as of this writing. Much diversification is to be expected in the coming years.

As stated before, generalizations about role-playing and larping can only have ideal character. Each larp is a specific arrangement of certain network elements. Here, individual cons are not connected to each other because they correspond to an abstract definition of “larp,” but because they link to these

elements. These links may be intangible, such as the citing of fantasy genre elements, material such as a larp sword imported from Denmark or an introductory book on larp, but also occur in the form of human actors such as Stahlberg and Hinasaki. Due to their specific history of translation from German, larps in Japan organized by Laymūn trace numerous connections, which also many larps in Europe follow. In addition to the above-mentioned tendency to prefer appropriations from (Tolkien-inspired) fantasy, this “translation” (adapting, adjusting) includes not only the linguistic transfer, but also the many practical elements, such as rules, character classes and the like, among others known already from pen & paper RPGs — despite the emphasis on borders to this established sibling practice or others, such as cosplay. Larp in its “Laymūn”-configuration is faced with limitations that do not exist in Europe, and creates connections for which specific materials, like 100-yen shop items, and non-humans, such as the discussed guidebooks, act as key players.

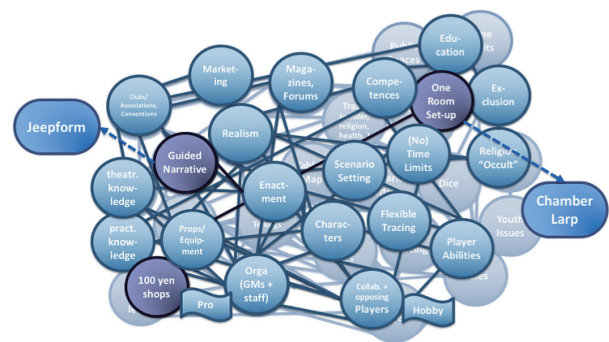


Fig. 7: Larp extended by Laymūn.

Besides the fact that larpers in Japan communicate in Japanese, three elements characterize a certain Laymūn configuration (see Fig. 7). Two of them, guided narratives and one-room set-ups, may be rare for the fantasy genre in Europe but can be found in other arrangements of larp. For example, the Jeepform style (located somewhere between TRPG and larp) is also characterized by very structured, scene-based play, while so-called “chamber larps,” often with a political agenda, take place in one-room setups, too. The capturing of 100-yen-shops and the reconfiguration of the four walls of a community centre into an

18) See Regitzesdatter 2011, 73; Montola 2012, 301. I could also accompany a Japanese larper in Germany in the course of my fieldwork. After attending a con she explained how quickly she had indeed immersed in the setting, but how difficult it was for her to follow the conversations of the German participants.

19) CLOSS also prepared a “Larp Safety Seal,” which larp organizers may receive and advertise their events with, if they adhere to certain physical and emotional safety standards: <https://closs.larp.jp/ils/> (accessed 2018/11/03).

otherworld via all the little things acquired there, however, is Laymūn's lasting and distinctive addition to the practice-network.

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